

require increased fiscal support but will result in schools being able to receive vital assistance from a nearby source. This change moves intermediate school districts into a stronger support role and allows them to respond more rapidly to the specific needs of their constituent school districts.

As a co-partner in a committed effort to unify services throughout the educational system, colleges and universities find themselves in a position to provide training to both new and experienced teachers so that they may work effectively with new clientele. These same institutions are in a position to further develop their ability to provide school personnel with the latest research in a format which can be readily utilized in their efforts to improve the quality of education for all students.

With a well-developed, cohesive plan, it is also possible to enhance the utilization of the many staff-developed programs which are available to the local school district and to classroom teachers. Deciding which of these is most appropriate can be difficult if there is no clear sense of educational goals and direction. When goals are clear, educators have the necessary information base to make enlightened choices about which programs may best suit their district or classroom situation. Further, the development of a framework will allow educational institutions greater insights to the benefits they may derive from the expertise and experience of each other. Members of the Michigan Department of Education and the State Board of Education may find themselves taking a greater leadership role than in past years. The role of policy development will include the definition of a cohesive program of services necessary to assist schools in the achievement of their goals.

Achievement of the goals of the nineties is dependent on the ability of all educational institutions to work toward a cooperative relationship which puts the needs of students first. There must be less of a "them and us" mentality in the decision-making process. Fewer decisions can be made at the K-12 level without the cooperative efforts of principals, teachers and superintendents. Few decisions can be made in isolation by associations, labor organizations or the State. Rather, decisions must be made by educators at all levels. This kind of reaction to the discoveries of the eighties will place the educational system in a proactive stance developing programs which meet the needs of their clients—the students—rather than reacting to the latest crisis report about education. While individuals can make a difference, the educational community working together will make a difference and meet the challenge of the nineties.

Ted Okey

THE LAW OF THE SITUATION: RECONCEPTUALIZING THE DROPOUT PROBLEM

"The fatal conceit is that we can control the world around us."

—Frederick Von August Hayek

The year is 1900. Ninety per cent of America's high school students drop out. Expanding factory and farm labor markets absorb the young, largely immigrant dropouts. There is no discussion of a dropout problem.

The year is 1940. The dropout rate stands at 76%. As America gears up for war many dropouts are absorbed by the armed forces. Increasing numbers head to the factories. Dropping out is still not conceived of as a problem.

The year is 1958. The dropout rate is now only 25%. Young men leave school at age 16 and 17 to take assembly-line jobs in the growing auto and steel industries, thumbing their noses at their college educated teachers whose wages they now exceed. Young women leave school to help out at home, marry, or also join the workforce. As the Eisenhower years draw to a close, Americans enjoy post-war prosperity, a world of plenty. It will be several years before the first national study of dropouts, *Project TALENT*, is conducted.

It is 1989. The dropout rate hovers at a stubborn 25%. According to Samuel Peng (1982) the rate has remained at this percentage since 1958. Less than 2% of the work force are employed in farming. Assembly-line and other factory jobs shrink with the increase in automation, robotics, and the movement to high-tech and service industries. There are no welcoming job markets for this generation of dropouts. In fact, in *Dropouts in America* Andrew Hahn and colleagues (1987) proclaim, "the jobless rate for Whites who dropout is 47 per cent. For Blacks it is 73 per cent. Stay in school! The odds are against you if you try to make it in the job market." America has a dropout problem. The dropout rate is reported in the 1980s reform literature as a symbol of the failure of the American educational system.

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Why the sudden interest in a dropout rate, which has remained stable for 31 years? As Max Weber (1949) reminds us, we only place significance on and take interest in those elements of our concrete reality which are related to that which we culturally value. We Americans value work. Some Americans, primarily those from the middle and upper classes, have also valued a high school education as a stepping stone to securing the best jobs available. It may also be argued that the lower classes, which comprise the largest segment of the dropout population, have rarely viewed education as the key to a brighter future.

This brief review of dropout rates in the twentieth century provides a context for reconceptualizing the dropout problem in America. It will be argued that efforts to quantify significant causes of dropping out, without first studying the nature and meaning that the act of dropping out has for the individual, have led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the dropout situation as a school rather than a societal problem. It will also be argued that the emphasis placed on a quick reduction of the dropout rate (Hahn, et al., 1987; Mann, 1986) has resulted in short-term responses. Caught up in the wake of reforms which demand higher expectations, more time in school, more testing and stiffer academic requirements, these short-term responses not only defeat the very purposes of the reform movement, but may have serious long range consequences in terms of further eroding the value of a high school education.

The thesis which underlies this argument is that the popular twentieth century American notion of our educational system as the great equalizer, a system capable of addressing societal problems, is a myth. Rather, schools represent a bureaucratic structure which has failed to abide by "The Law of the Situation," a term coined by Mary Parker Follett in 1904. That is to say, schools have failed to ask themselves what John Naisbitt (1984) has pointed out as the most important question of the 1980s, "What business are you in?" Schools have not formulated a strategic vision of their proper role in society. The dropout rate may not have changed in 31 years, but the situation certainly has. Changes in the demands of the job market have resulted in new and greater expectations being placed upon the schools. It is these changes which are the real key to understanding the dropout problem. A review of dropout studies dating back to the early 1920s provides a consistent record of lower socioeconomic status as the primary factor in dropping out of high school. While the literature glosses

over this with countless euphemisms, the simple truth is that the poor make up the largest percentage of those who drop out of high school. In fact, when the data was controlled for poverty, *The High School and Beyond Study* revealed that there was no significant difference in terms of race or gender. Poverty was the number one factor among all groups which dropped out.

While this fact seems simple and straightforward, a review of the literature, which has attempted to quantify the causes of dropping out, does not present such a clear picture. Tremendous effort is expended in breaking down the reasons why students drop out. The list includes being from a single parent home (things are worse if it is a single male parent than a single female parent); being from a large family; being retained in a grade (up 50%); being retained twice (up 100%); tardiness; absenteeism; being a discipline problem; being in a vocational program; having low self-esteem; having external locus of control; being pregnant; getting married; having to help out at home; having punitive parents; and having parents who didn't complete school. The list goes on and soon one may forget the common factor which ties all of these reasons together—the majority of those who drop out are poor.

As we recall this simple fact it is important to remind ourselves that the dropout rate of 25% was not conceptualized as a problem in 1958, whereas in 1989 it is referred to in terms of its epidemic proportions. Following Follett's law we must ask, what has changed? One important answer is—the world of work! Job markets once available to dropouts have shrunk or disappeared in our modern, competitive, and demanding global economy.

Herein lies the misconception and misunderstanding of the dropout situation. Schools have never before been faced with dealing seriously with the dropout problem, because dropping out has never been the real issue for society it now is. The real issue has always been, can dropouts find work? As long as work was available in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, dropping out was not a problem. We value work, and as long as work has been available to dropouts, honor and integrity could be maintained, with or without an education. But when unemployment rates for dropouts reach 47% for Whites and 73% for Blacks, they can no longer be ignored. The rising costs of unemployment compensation, the swelling ranks of the welfare rolls, and increases in the crime rate pose threats to our

weakened economy. Suddenly, dropouts are a 71 billion dollar a year problem (Mann, 1986).

Schools were not forced to deal with dropping out as a serious problem until dropouts became a societal problem. The dropout rate remained stable for 31 years, yet our current understanding of the nature of dropping out is limited by studies which focus their energy on identifying significant causal factors while treating dropouts as passive variables reducible to quantities in an equation. The truth is that, given the current status of the research, we do not know why this magical number of 25% has dropped out consistently since 1958. What we do know is that they come primarily from the lower classes and that poverty is the primary factor related to dropping out.

Perhaps it is the failure of the schools to provide lower class students with meaningful preparation for the world of work. But this vocational goal is one the schools have never taken seriously, always assigning it a secondary role, discounting it as anti-intellectual (Alder, 1982; Goodlad, 1984). In the schools' defense it must be acknowledged, however, that they have rarely shirked the responsibilities placed on them by society, whether they be driver's education, sex education, or drug prevention programs. It may also be fair to say that while education has been charged with preparing youth for their role in a democratic society and for solving other social ills, preparation for the world of work has at most been a part of the hidden curriculum, not an explicit societal expectation.

Another possible explanation is that the high school diploma has become devalued. One way of assessing this would be to ask yourself, what job could you hope for right out of high school? The high school diploma is not a ticket into the workforce. Many high school graduates find the only jobs readily available are service and clerical positions which pay little more than minimum wage. Often, for these low paying jobs, employers do not even ask to see evidence of high school graduation. Further, it is illegal on many job applications to even inquire whether or not the diploma has been earned. Given these conditions, those who plan to enter the workforce without the benefit of further training have little incentive to finish school. Yet we continue to conceptualize the dropout problem in terms of keeping students in high school.

The inability of today's dropouts to find work, and thereby a useful role in society, has focused emphasis on dropping out as a failure of the

schools. The schools' response to the dropout problem is consistent with the majority of the 1980s reform movement which relies on changing the structure of the system. Those who are concerned with teenage pregnancy recommend programs to keep these young women in school (Ekstrom, et al., 1986). Others who are concerned with at-risk youth recommend alternative education programs (Gold and Mann, 1986; O'Connor, 1985; Ranbom, 1986; Wehlage, 1983). The educational bureaucracy expands in the hopes that more and better coordinated programs will help reduce the dropout rate. When well thought out and operated according to the standards and guidelines of their designers, these programs do demonstrate reasonable success. Yet the statement this makes about our educational system can not be ignored. The current system is not capable of dealing with the problems it faces. We must have an alternative system, one which trims away the bureaucracy and responds more fluidly to the needs of its students.

If this fact is disconcerting, the type of response found within the bureaucracy will be more so. On the one hand, schools have busied themselves tightening down the structure and raising graduation requirements. On the other hand, they are being pressured to keep more students in school. One of the results is what Sandra E. Miller, et al., (1988) refer to as accommodation. In their small ethnographic study of learning disabled and at-risk students they identified institutional, classroom, and teacher levels of accommodation designed to hold students in school. Accommodation is loosely defined as a concern for students' needs in an effort to make school a more pleasant environment. The goal of accommodation is to reduce dropping out by engaging students more fully in school.

Miller reports three negative side effects of this accommodation:

- One side effect has to do with student expectations that accommodations will always be made.
- A second side effect is that school learning did not require even moderate levels of active student engagement with the content of instruction.
- A third side effect of accommodation was student apathy and boredom.

In a recent study of an alternative education program in a suburban Michigan school district, this writer confirmed all three of these effects of accommodation. What was observed was a system which allows students

to negotiate the lowest possible standards and expectations for their education. While the short term gain is a reduction in the number of dropouts, the long term effect is the devaluation of the high school diploma and the further erosion of its credibility.

It is time for a reconceptualization of the dropout problem. To accomplish this we must first review the existing situation to ensure a proper understanding of what is being asked of the schools. First, the high schools are being asked to keep in school a population which they have failed to hold throughout their history. Second, they are being asked to do this in the midst of reforms which are bringing about tighter structures and more rigid standards. Finally, there is the difficult expectation that a high school diploma can once again signify a level of training and preparation which makes entrance into the workforce upon graduation possible. In short, schools are being asked to take on the demands of a global economy and the rising unemployment rate among dropouts.

The belief that schools, acting alone, are capable of meeting this complex challenge is a myth. An extension of this myth is the further belief that tampering with the structure of the American high school can result in more meaningful programs which will meet the demands of work for the twenty-first century. Such changes will, at best, provide some short term solutions, while policies such as accommodation may have lasting detrimental effects.

The real challenge for educators in addressing the dropout problem in the decades to come will be to begin by asking the question, what business are we in? Educators must develop a strategic vision of what education in the future should look like. Given the diverse, if not overwhelming, expectations placed upon schools, this vision should not be developed in isolation. Rather, it should be the product of the larger society working together with educators. It should involve parents, community organizations, private citizens, and most importantly representatives from all areas of business. Once such a vision is established, strategic planning of a worthwhile nature may begin. Reasonable goals which meet the needs of all the consumers of education should be the aim of these coalitions. While schools today may not be well equipped to address the dropout problem, a reconceptualization of the problem as a societal rather than a school problem may offer greater hope for the future.

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